

Secularism and the Kingdom of Christ

Domenic Marbaniang

The word *secularism* comes from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning ‘a generation or this age,’ and corresponds to the Greek *aeon*. Its meaning extends on to connote also this ‘wordly;’ thus, its Lower Latin form *saecularis* means ‘worldly.’¹ Basically, secularism is the ideology that facilitates practice without reference to religion of any kind.² When applied to politics, it is the state policy of being indifferent to political theologies, the policy of keeping politics free from religious interferences.

In his book, *The Secular City*,³ Harvey Cox differentiates secularization from secularism. According to Cox, secularization ‘implies a historical process, almost certainly irreversible, in which society and culture are delivered from tutelage to religious control and closed metaphysical world views.’⁴ Quoting the German theologian Friedrich Gogarten, Cox announces secularization as the legitimate consequence of the impact of biblical faith on history. It is not untrue that biblical faith has had a powerful impact in the reformation of cultures world-wide and the shaping of modern history. According to Cox, the biblical doctrine of Creation is the ground of freedom from animism, totemism, pantheism, and magic. This has led to the development of natural science. Now sacrifices to wind, rain, and sun are laughed to scorn as science and religion are separated from each other. Further, the Exodus narrative is seen as the desacralization of politics. It signifies insurrection against a duly constituted monarch who claimed divine rights to governance. This not only frees politics from priest-craft but has also become the basis for modern political liberation movements and revolutions. Cox further contends that with the Sinai Covenant and its prohibition of idols, values are deconsecrated. The devaluation of idols is the precursor to the devaluation of absolutes. With the revelation of idols as mere projections of human mind, their absolute value is broken down. Thus historical relativism is considered to be the end product of secularization. Consequently, traditional values are no longer regarded as absolute. This emancipatory impact of biblical faith, according to Cox, is irreversible and must not be feared since it emancipates man for a proper relationship with nature, state, and society. It is, however, the ideology of secularism that needs to be checked for it is not only a narrow outlook of the world as devoid of God but also destructive of the individual freedom that has come through by secularization.

When viewed in the political context of religious pluralism, however, secularism can be an aspired policy of the state. Evidently, religious politics of any kind can be destructive to religious freedom. The history of Christianity is proof enough of the atrocities committed by Christian rulers against Christians who were considered to be heretics because of their liberal or reformative views. Religious freedom can only be realized in a truly secular state. But, as Cox notes, a secular state itself can become guilty of imposing secularism as an ideology on its citizens; for instance, when it declares practice of religion as anti-scientific or criminal. This kind of approach has been observed in hard secular atheist states where communism has held power. Total indifference towards religion, however, is impossible since man is not just a political animal; he is also a religious being. Yet, it is within politically sanctioned freedom of religious practice that religion itself can find true realization.

There are at least two things to note about the development of secular politics in relation to

¹ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd edn. (US: Dorset and Baber, 1983), p.1641.

² *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, p.1641.

³ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, rev. edn. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975).

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 18.

the Kingdom of Christ:

1. Political Irreligiosity
2. Religious Individualism

Political Irreligiosity

Modern secularism has dethroned the gods from the realm of politics. The dethronement of the divine from the human hemisphere was a gradual process appearing first in Classical Greek philosophy. Thales (5th Century B.C.) is considered to be the first who 'shifted the basis of thought from a mythological base to one of scientific inquiry.'⁵ The first philosophers, known as *sophos*, challenged the mythological and superstitious assumptions of traditionalism, thus unshackling philosophy from the control of religion. The impact of the rational and secular spirit of Classical philosophy, however, could be seen in the development of city-states that de-emphasized the role of gods in politics and separated government from religion, magic, and superstition. With the fall of Greece, however, this secular influence over politics disappeared. Roman politics was highly coloured by religious sentiments and beliefs.

Secularism resurfaced during the Renaissance (A.D. 1359-1600) as humanism and individualism gathered momentum. However, it was during the Protestant Reformation that the theory of the separation of church and state took root. Religious persecution under Papal political influence led Reformation thinkers to denounce the authority of the Church over political matters. In 1523, Martin Luther published his "On Temporal Authority," in which he argued for the division of the church and the state. Luther specified two distinct realms or powers: *weltliches Regiment* (German word for 'the kingdom of the world,' 'the State') and *geistliches Regiment* (German word for 'the kingdom of God,' 'the Church'). The state was connected with God's continual work of creation and the church with God's continual work of redemption. God, Luther stated, is the head of both the kingdoms.⁶ Therefore, subjection to the ruler's edict was only necessary as long as the edict conformed to God's divine will as shown in the scriptures.

With the American and the French Revolutions, the idea of human rights gained ascendancy. The first amendment of the American constitution declared that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.' The American and British constitutions had a great impact on the development of constitutions like that of India. The secularization of politics meant the dethronement of the gods from politics. There are still elements that try to disrupt the secularity of politics through religious provocations; however, secularized society finds such religious provocations as quaint. Yet, the Nazi style of breeding ethnic or communal animosity on non-religious basis does have powerful effect on the masses. This, nevertheless, shows that it is not the gods but communal sentiments that are behind them.

Religious Individualism

The secularity of politics is based upon the recognition of man's fundamental right to freedom of conscience and religion. Article 25 of the Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion. Freedom of religion is a right recognized by the Bible. It is based upon the biblical doctrine of human liberty. Therefore, the Bible never teaches forced conversion.

⁵ Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1988), p. 6.

⁶ Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), p. 406.

The Bible emphasizes truthfulness and spirituality of worship as acceptable before God (Jn. 4: 23). Sure, religion was more a social phenomena in the Old Testament; however, the individuality of spirituality was always highlighted (Gen. 4: 7; 6: 8; Ex. 32: 10; Ps. 51: 6-17). Similarly, one finds in the New Testament that God is individually concerned about His children (Lk. 15). Religious individualism, however, is not the same as religious privatism. Religious privatism does respect the freedom of conscience; however, it regards religion to have nothing to do with public life, often to the extent that talk of religion at public places or by means of public media seems disgusting. Unfortunately, religious privatism is one of the byproducts of social secularization. Religious individualism, on the other hand, respects both the freedom of conscience and the freedom to religious speech or religious preaching.

The individualisation of religion must be seen as the effect of the Gospel of the kingdom of God. It is based upon the preaching of individual responsibility for salvation through personal commitment to Christ. It is religious individualism that makes religious reformation possible and assists the true development of the spirit of religion. True secular politics does not judge one's national allegiance by means of one's religious allegiance. Thus, though one may be a Hindu or a Christian in heart, he could still be a true Indian at the same time. This could only happen when the socialist nature of religion is replaced by an individualist one and the strength of the nation is measured, not by religious plurality, but by political stability, law and order, and economic growth of all classes. The kingdom of God operates individualistically and transcending all national barriers since God is primarily concerned with the individual person and not the nation to which that person belongs. Therefore, individual freedom of conscience and religion must be seen as in tune with the dynamics of the kingdom of God. It is the preaching of the kingdom that holds people individually responsible before God.

However, both the above facets of political secularism must only be seen as having pre-judgement significance. At the second advent of Christ, all acts of freedom will be judged. Secular politics will cease to exist since all knee will bow before Christ and all tongue will confess that He is Lord (Phil. 2: 10, 11). That Christocratic rule will not be enforced by might of sword but by the final revelation of God. The final judgement will separate the people of the world from the people of God. It will mean the salvation of the believers and the condemnation of unbelievers. This eschatological perspective is significant since one is not entitled to judge anyone before the day of judgement. In other words, religion now is an individual issue. No human is judge in religious matters pertaining to the conscience (cf. 1 Cor. 10: 28). A believer stands or falls before his God (Rom. 14: 1-10). Thus, in the modern scheme of things the secularist promotion of religious individualism must be seen as a veritably biblical.

In summary, social secularization is seen as the emancipation of politics and society from religious dictatorship. Political secularism not only frees politics from domination of religion but also promotes religious freedom. Social secularization is individualistically liberating, as Cox saw it. This is clearly evident in the modern secular city where a person enjoys more individual freedom than in the villages or even towns. The social adhesive provided by religion and tradition is weak in the cities. This is all the result of freeing society from dominance of religion. This, however, does not mean that social relationships have come to an end. It only means that they have taken newer forms and meanings. Also, instances of religious fundamentalism or even atheistic fundamentalism must be seen as anachronistic. They look odd amidst the secularized status quo. The extent of such secular dominance must not be regarded as anti-Christian, but as assisting the cause of Christ's kingdom by giving the Church an opportunity to reach individuals with the Gospel with the result that individuals are now more free to make a rational commitment to Christ.

References

Cox, Harvey. *The Secular City*, New York: Macmillan Pub. Co. Inc., 1975.

Marbaniang, R. Domenic S., *Secularism in India: A Historical Analysis*, unpublished M.Phil Thesis, Bangalore: AIT, 2005.

Perry, Marvin. *Western Civilization*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001, 4th edn.

Thompson, Bard. *Humanists and Reformers*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981.

Zacharias, Ravi. *Deliver Us From Evil*, USA: Wpublishing Group, 1997.